



News Release

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ECONOMICS OF CONSERVING TWO RARE SOUTHWEST FISHES ANALYZED -Public Meetings for Critical Habitat Proposal Announced-

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service today announced the re-opening of the comment period and availability of a draft economic analysis and draft environmental assessment for its December 20, 2005 proposal to re-designate critical habitat in New Mexico and Arizona for the federally threatened spikedace and loach minnow.

The draft economic analysis estimates the impacts of spikedace and loach minnow conservation efforts in the proposed designated areas – not just those impacts exclusively associated with this proposed critical habitat designation – to be between \$25.2 and \$100.3 million over the next 20 years. The draft environmental assessment broadly evaluates the effects of the proposed critical habitat designation.

“We are looking for additional scientific and commercial information that is relevant to the proposed critical habitat designation for these two threatened fishes,” said Dr. Benjamin Tuggle, Acting Director for the Southwest Region. “Public participation is essential to our efforts to develop proper protection for these fishes and understand how conservation efforts may affect local environments, communities and economics.”

The Service will hold two public hearings on the proposal, draft economic analysis, and draft environmental assessment, each preceded by an informational session:

– **June 13, 2006, in Camp Verde, Arizona**, at the Tri-City Room, Cliff Castle Casino Hotel & Conference Center, 555 Middle Verde Road (I-17 exit 289 east). Informational session will be held from 3 to 4:30 p.m. followed by a public hearing from 6:30 to 8 p.m.

– **June 20, 2006, in Silver City, New Mexico** at the Flame Convention Center, 2800 Pinos Altos Road. Informational session will be held from 3 to 4:30 p.m. followed by a public hearing from 6:30 to 8 p.m.

The Service has proposed to designate a total of 633 miles of rivers and streams and their flood plains in New Mexico and Arizona as critical habitat for the two species. Broken out separately by species, the total includes 376 miles for the spikedace and 474 miles for the loach minnow in portions of the Gila, San Francisco, Blue, Black, Verde, Lower San Pedro rivers and some tributaries in Apache, Graham, Greenlee, Pinal, and Yavapai counties in Arizona, and Catron, Grant, and Hidalgo counties in New Mexico.

The proposed critical habitat includes river and stream reaches, plus a 300-foot buffer extending from each bank. In New Mexico, 168 Federal stream-miles, one State stream-mile, and 90 private stream-miles have been proposed for designation. In Arizona, 199 Federal stream-miles, eight State stream-miles, 134 private stream-miles and 33 tribal stream-miles are being considered.

Critical habitat is a term in the Endangered Species Act. It identifies geographic areas that contain features essential for the conservation of a threatened or endangered species and that may require special management considerations or protection. The designation of critical habitat does not affect land ownership or establish a refuge, wilderness, reserve, preserve, or other conservation area. It does not allow government or public access to private lands or limit public access to public or private lands and waters. Federal agencies are required to consult with the Service for any activities they undertake, fund or permit that affect designated critical habitat.

The spikedace is silver-sided and the loach minnow is olive-colored (males are brilliantly colored during spawning) with upward-directed eyes. Both the spikedace and loach minnow are less than three inches long and require perennial streams, where they inhabit shallow water with sand, gravel, and rubble substrates free of fine sedimentation and moderate to swift currents.

The spikedace and loach minnow are threatened by habitat destruction and introduction of nonnative aquatic species that compete with them. The occupied range of the two fish has diminished by an estimated 85-90 percent because of these threats.

In 30 years of implementing the ESA, the Service has found that the designation of critical habitat provides little additional protection to most listed species, while preventing the Service from using scarce conservation resources for activities with greater conservation benefits.

In almost all cases, recovery of listed species will come through voluntary cooperative partnerships, not regulatory measures such as critical habitat. Habitat is also protected through cooperative measures under the Act including Habitat Conservation Plans, Safe Harbor Agreements, Candidate Conservation Agreements and state programs. In addition, voluntary partnership programs such as the Service's Private Stewardship Grants and Partners for Fish and Wildlife program also restore habitat. Habitat for endangered species is provided on many national wildlife refuges, managed by the Service, and state wildlife management areas.

Comments on the proposed critical habitat, the draft economic analysis, and the draft environmental assessment should be submitted by July 6, 2006, to the Field Supervisor, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Arizona Ecological Services Field Office, 2321 West Royal Palm Road, Suite 103, Phoenix, Arizona 85021-4951 or by facsimile to 602/242-2513. Electronic comments can be submitted to: SD_LMComments@fws.gov. Copies of the proposed rule, draft economic analysis and draft environmental assessment are available online at <http://www.fws.gov/arizonaes/> or by calling 602-242-0210.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses 545 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 63 Fish and Wildlife Management offices and 81 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands,

and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Assistance program, which distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.

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NOTE TO EDITORS: Photos of the spokedace and loach minnow and other supporting information are available at <http://www.fws.gov/arizonaes/Fish.htm> or by contacting Jeff Humphrey at (602) 242-0210.